

## Thought Leaders:

The following interview with Steve Morris is a condensed version of HR.com's live, one-hour online webcast.

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**DC: Our topic today is managing multicultural dynamics and I know you have lived and worked in Asia for many years now. Can you start off by pointing out some of the significant workplace differences between North America and Asia?**

**SM:** I have been living in Asia since 1989; originally in Hong Kong and now in Singapore. I have also traveled from as far north as Japan to as far south as Australia and as far west as India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. I have a good breadth of experience with the Asian cultures and one of the things that I have learned is that no one culture is the same as the other. Japan, Korea and India are all very different from one another. When we talk about cultural differences it is important to recognize that not all Asians are of one culture, so we can't generalize. I think what we can do is look at how the cultures are different than the U.S.

There are certainly some general differences that I have been able to pick up on. My colleagues here in Asia will talk about the North Americans when they come here to do business. They are struck by their directness in both their speech and their physical behaviors. In North America we tend to give direct eye contact to signal that we are listening and that we are honest and trustworthy. In many places in Asia, direct eye contact is something to be avoided as it can signal aggression. Where you think you are being honest, you may be perceived as intimidating in a different culture. Also, in the North American and European cultures there tends to be more vocal disagreement. In Asia that is not as frequent, especially in public. While they may disagree, it would be considered rude to vocalize that in a public venue. It is important that you have time to privately consult with people to make sure they are onboard with what you are saying.

**DC: Yes, that can certainly be a fertile ground for misunderstanding. You might walk away from a conversation thinking a person agrees with you when in fact they were just being polite.**

**SM:** There are 24 different words for "yes" in the Japanese language. There is a "yes" for maybe, a "yes" for I'm thinking about it and so on. In the Thai culture, they are so hospitable that they don't want to say "no." No matter what you ask them they tend to say, "yes" just as a matter of respect. You don't want to be too quick to assume meaning.

In North America we tend to be very matter of fact and contract oriented. We put the contract on the table and expect people to respond to that. In Asian cultures the

relationship is much more important. Establishing that relationship and trust is going to be a higher predictor of success than what it says in black and white on paper. That can be very frustrating for the North American. Get used to the people first and place less emphasis on the contract.

The last point I wanted to share was that Asian cultures are quite mature and old. They have thousands of years of tradition behind them. For example, the Chinese culture has a deep respect for authority, which shows its face as deference to hierarchy. In the North American context people feel a bit more egalitarian in a workplace setting. For example, people will still feel comfortable speaking up around their boss whereas in Asia they might not speak up to the perceived authority for fear of showing disrespect. If you are a leader it is important that you ask for comments rather than assume that they will be forthcoming.

**DC: In America we tend to believe that our style is right. We believe that it is right to speak up and that it is right to put things down on paper. Do you have any advice for people who are trying to come to terms with the fact that their way isn't always the "right" way?**

**SM:** There is no right or wrong, they are just ways to behave. What might seem right to you might seem very awkward to another and vice-versa. The difficulty is the phenomenon of assuming that our way is the right way. That is a cultural arrogance. Even in the U.S. we have differences in cultures from the east coast and the west coast. We have gotten used to that and will attribute behaviors to the fact that someone is from New York or Texas. Take that and magnify that. The most important thing is respect and going into a situation with an open mind and respecting the other people's culture. Whether you are going there or they are coming here, it doesn't matter. If someone is not from your neighborhood be respectful that they may have different attitudes and beliefs. It doesn't mean that you have to agree with them or change yourself, but it is imperative not to impose your own value set on others. I think that is an important issue that global companies have to wrestle with.

**DC: What sorts of things do companies need to understand in order to effectively work with their Asian counterparts?**

**SM:** It is important not to generalize and understand that each nationality has its own unique culture and customs. Even within a country we shouldn't generalize. There are differences across generations now. A lot of Asian countries have a very educated and wealthy younger generation and their values are very different than those of the older generations.

Gift giving is something that is very prevalent in Asia, which is difficult for North Americans to deal with because of the line between gift giving and bribery. Where is that line drawn? People love to give gifts as a way of building relationships in Asia and they don't expect anything in return.

It's important to be aware of different styles of communication and be aware that other cultures may not always understand the words that we use. I had a great experience with the word "integrity." I was at a conference with about 40 CEOs from North America, Asia and Europe. I asked them to tell me what "integrity" meant and share that with the

people at their table. Everyone was shocked at the differences we saw. To some people it meant following the letter of the law, to some it meant respecting your contract and to others it meant taking care of your friends and family or being true to yourself. We use English as a common language for international business but we don't always have the same basic understanding and cultural context for what those words mean.

**DC: Can you talk to us about the concept of 'face?' What is it and how does it affect business in Asia?**

**SM:** Face is the concept of preserving your public dignity. How others see you is an important thing to preserve. If I criticize you in public people would see that as taking your face away. You might just be critiquing what I am saying but to others it would be perceived as an aggressive act. People will tend to avoid public confrontation for fear of taking away someone's face. People will also avoid pointing out mistakes. I was teaching a class to some business leaders and when I looked at my slides I started wondering if the data on my slides was correct. I turned to my assistant, a Singaporean, and I asked her if the slide was correct. She said it was and so I attempted to explain around the slide. After the presentation she told me that the slide was not correct. I asked her why she didn't tell me that when I asked and she said it was because she didn't want to embarrass me. For me, it was more embarrassing thinking that I was teaching something that was incorrect whereas she was trying to save my face.

**DC: What challenges do companies encounter when they expand into different countries and start working with different cultures?**

**SM:** The biggest challenge I encounter is getting enough talent to lead the business. The limit to growth everywhere is finding that leadership and talent that can take people forward. Who are the people who are going to be able to work across the language and culture barriers?

Another difference that shows up is the alignment around time. In the U.S. people seem to be very fixated on time. In Hong Kong, if you are not at your meeting within 15 minutes of the stated time they are going to go to your competitor. In Singapore you can be 15 minutes late to a meeting but after about 30 minutes they start getting more irritated. In Malaysia they might give you about 45 minutes' slack. In Indonesia it is something like two-and-a-half or three hours. You might set up a meeting for 2:00 p.m. but for them it really means 'at some point in the afternoon.' With all these different time concepts you can see that when people get together for regional conferences and meetings harmonizing time can be a massive challenge.

**DC: I wanted to talk about feedback. In any business environment, we are always looking for feedback but when we are working in environments where people have different views on authority, public perception, and time this can be extremely difficult. You have had to manage this yourself, so how do you get good feedback from people?**

**SM:** In a time of rapid change and globalization we need feedback. Feedback is not as forthcoming in the Asian cultures. Maybe in America you might get too much feedback. The reluctance here is that you don't want to offend anyone. Even if you are getting feedback it might be false feedback. Rather than offer feedback many people will hold

their opinions back because they might be risking themselves or drawing attention to someone else's faults. It is almost rude and against your upbringing to speak up. It is not malicious or cowardice, it is just a cultural tradition. As a successful leader you have to go out and ask for feedback. You have to teach people to give you feedback. To do this you need to have some trust. It goes back to relationships. If you can build trust with people over time they may give you some of that feedback.

I had one Asian organization that I had been working with for about three years. I was in a meeting and everyone was agreeing with what I said. After the meeting one of the women came up to me and said, "We've known you for a long time and we appreciate what you do, which is why I am telling you that when they say 'yes' they don't mean it." She told me because she respected me and that I was considered a friend.

**DC: How do you know if an organization is doing well at managing across cultures? What are the measures of success to show if you are on track or not on track?**

**SM:** If you have diversity in the senior positions then you are obviously a lot further along. Originally businesses would come to this part of the world and have a top executive from the home country be the CEO. The ex-pats were traditionally the leaders and the Asians were the rank and file. Being able to develop leaders in Asia that can be trusted and are comfortable with their own culture - as well as with headquarters' culture - is important.

We can start embracing more diversity. When you mix things up you get a bit of chaos, but you also get innovation. From diversity comes strength. It is a great card to play but you need to expect a little friction. It needs to be top down. You need to have support at the top otherwise you are going to hit a glass ceiling. Maybe the HR role is to start educating the top on what other companies are doing to diversify leadership at the top. If you need more Asian leaders you need to start investing in that.

You should look at whether the core organizational values reflect a commitment to diversity. You can see it in a mission statement or vision statement. Companies that are successful in this have a culture of understanding and acceptance. They are open to different styles. You also see more mentoring and support given to minority groups. By support I mean developmental support like training future leaders. Companies for whom this is working often brag about their numbers. They take pride in their diversity. Look at what you have and start sharing with the people in head office how diverse you actually are.

**DC: What should we do to improve our relationships and organizational culture?**

**SM:** I would start with clarifying the values that people hold. You might talk about integrity, teamwork, success and commitment. You can also share different aspirations. What are you hoping to achieve? What would make this a great place to work? You need to have dialogues around that instead of just bringing with you what you think. People like to talk about values and aspirations so it can be quite a motivating technique to use.

I think it is helpful to clarify your intent regarding diversity and cultural positivity. At least have a statement of intent of where you want to go. You might not be there yet, but know where you are going. It creates a focal point.

Encourage leaders to prepare and present a cultural profile of their people. If you are head of a region you should be able to give some of the demographics of not just the workforce but also the people you serve. What are the people like? What are the thoughts and issues like? What are the employees like? See yourself as an ambassador for the market you are working in and put together a presentation of the culture that will help people understand each other.

Another easy thing you can do is circulate notices and news and videos of other international offices. If something is going on in New York, send it to Tokyo. Send what is going on in Tokyo to Singapore. Get people used to looking at what is going on outside of their own frame of reference. That will help expedite internationalization of your business.

The last tip is to assess whether or not you have the leaders to take you forward. You need to start mentoring leaders at a young age within the company. Assign mentors cross-culturally. Maybe have one of your Japanese leaders mentor someone in Singapore. Get people out of their own cultural context.